



# Secure Attachment and Gender Stereotypes: Exploring Father-Daughter Relationship in Selected Animated Short Films

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**Abstract**— Parent-child attachment bonds and attachment styles significantly influence communication motives in father-daughter relationships, leading to numerous positive social and emotional outcomes in children. Warmth and involvement from fathers positively influence their daughters' social and cognitive development. "A secure attachment is not about the quantity of time spent together, but the quality of the emotional connection formed" (Mate 183). This paper seeks to explore a critical yet often overlooked aspect of caregiving role of fathers as primary nurturers in daughters' lives. While traditional narratives of caregiving tend to emphasize the role of mothers, this study argues for the recognition of fathers as equally capable and essential in promoting their children's development, specifically in fostering secure attachment and challenging long-held gender stereotypes.



**Keywords**— Attachment theory, father, daughter, gender stereotype, child development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Attachment is the strong, affectionate tie we have with special people in our lives that leads us to experience pleasure and joy when we interact with them and to be comforted by their nearness in times of stress" (Berk 424). The bond a child forms with their primary caregiver, known as attachment, is crucial and endures throughout their lifetime, significantly influencing their development. This early attachment affects a child's social-emotional, cognitive, and language growth.

The most beneficial attachment is a secure attachment, where the caregiver provides full attention and makes the child feel safe. Bowlby noted that early experiences of healthy attachment enable children to form future relationships based on those experiences. Attachment theory is one of the leading relationship-focused frameworks for understanding child development. Created by John Bowlby and further developed by Mary Ainsworth, attachment theory emphasizes the crucial bond that keeps a primary caregiver close to their child and the

infant's need to seek the caregiver's attention when distressed. "Attachment is a relationship in the service of a baby's emotion regulation and exploration. It is the deep, abiding confidence a baby has in the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver." (Sroufe's 51)

John Bowlby introduced attachment theory in his seminal work *Attachment and Loss*, with the first volume titled *Attachment* in 1969. This pioneering research, later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, established the framework for understanding the importance of early emotional connections between caregivers and children. Bowlby, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, emphasized that early experiences profoundly influence behavior and development throughout life. John Bowlby explained that a child's attachment relationships with primary caregivers establish the foundation for a set of expectations about both the self and others. This framework is known as the 'working model of the self.'

In the late 1960s, Ainsworth devised a classification system for attachment that categorizes

individuals into three orientations, building on Bowlby's attachment theory. In the 1970s, psychologist Mary Ainsworth conducted pioneering research that led to the development of attachment theory. Using infants in her studies, Ainsworth explored how their relationships with caregivers influenced them. In the 'Strange Situation' experiment, she observed how infants responded when their caregivers left and returned, sometimes in the presence of a stranger.

Hair Love is a compelling short animated film released in 2019, depicting the story of Zuri, a young African-American girl who learns to embrace her natural hair with the help of her father, Stephen. Directed by Matthew A. Cherry, the collaborative efforts of co-directors Bruce W. Smith and Everett Downing Jr. added realism and cultural significance to the film. With its heartfelt story and stunning animation, Hair Love captivated audiences and won the 2020 Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film.

In 2018, animators Bobby Pontillas and Andrew Chesworth co-created the short-animated film One Small Step. The story revolves around Luna, a young Chinese American woman aspiring to become an astronaut. Luna draws strength and resilience from her father's enduring love and support, which fosters a strong and nurturing relationship. Academic success in children can be linked to their cognitive ability to focus, particularly among those with secure attachments.

Chenglin Xie, a Chinese animator known for merging modern storytelling techniques with traditional Chinese artistic styles, created the animated short film Father and Daughter. Released in 2016, Father and Daughter explore the enduring relationship between a father and his daughter, depicting her journey from childhood through adolescence, highlighting her professional achievements and her bond with her father. Chenglin Xie aimed to create a timeless and emotionally resonant story that explores universal themes of love, loss, and the enduring bond between parent and child.

Secure attachment is crucial for a child's development, influencing emotional stability, resilience, and the ability to form healthy relationships. The 2011 Google advertisement Dear Sophie effectively portrays this relationship by demonstrating how a father's engagement and affection can foster a secure and nurturing bond with his daughter. Using a Gmail 'diary', the commercial features Google Chrome's capabilities while digitally chronicling a young girl's life through her father's perspective. He captures and cherishes every moment, from her first steps to her school years. The father writes and sends emails filled with love, encouragement, and

pride. During challenging times, he provides comfort, and he celebrates Sophie's achievements. For instance, his supportive words boost Sophie's confidence as she learns to ride a bike. Such encouragement reassures the child of their caregiver's constant presence, crucial for building a strong and secure relationship. The active and emotional involvement of supportive parental figures, as exemplified by the father's digital communication, plays a crucial role in a child's upbringing.

Michaël Dudok de Wit, a Dutch animator, filmmaker, and illustrator based in London, received an Academy Award in 2000 for his animated short film Father and Daughter. The deeply emotional film portrays a father bidding farewell to his young daughter as he paddles across a vast lake. As she grows older, the girl's love for her father remains steadfast and continues to influence her life significantly. This narrative powerfully illustrates the lasting impact of a secure attachment formed in childhood.

Fathers play an invaluable role in their daughters' lives, whether through their loving presence in today's digital age or the enduring emotional connection that lasts a lifetime. A child's academic achievement, motivation, and self-esteem are significantly influenced by their sense of secure attachment. It plays a crucial role in a child's development, significantly influencing their emotional regulation, resilience, and overall well-being.

Attachment theory, co-developed by Ainsworth and Bowlby, proposes that early interactions between infants and their primary caregivers significantly shape the child's emotional and social development. Ainsworth's key contribution to this theory was the development of the 'Strange Situation' procedure, a method designed to observe and classify infants' attachment styles.

The Strange Situation involved structured separations and reunions between a child and their caregiver, during which Ainsworth and her team observed behaviors such as exploration, responses to separations and reunions, and the child's reliance on the caregiver as a secure base. From these observations, Ainsworth identified three main attachment patterns: secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent/ resistant, later supplemented by disorganized attachment.

The primary attachment figure is typically the biological mother, though anyone consistently demonstrating nurturing behaviors over time can fulfill this role. Ainsworth states that, "The caregiver's sensitivity to the child's signals and her ability to respond appropriately to them are crucial for the development of a secure attachment." (24). The attachment figure should provide stability and comfort consistently to help the child develop a deep bond and rely on them for security and

comfort based on their responsiveness to the child's needs.

Fathers are often seen as figures of leadership, morality, security, and authority. The ongoing pursuit of equality in parenting brings notable advantages, including stronger family bonds, better work-life balance, positive role modeling, and a more just future for upcoming generations. This collaborative effort between both parents is crucial for shaping a brighter future for their children and society. By embracing nurturing roles, fathers play a pivotal part in this transformation, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive approach to parenting.

Hair Love significantly challenges traditional gender roles by showcasing an African American father who takes on the task of styling his daughter's hair, a role typically associated with mothers. This depiction breaks stereotypes, proving that fathers can provide the same level of nurturing and emotional support as mothers, thus redefining societal expectations of fatherhood.

One Small Step tells the story of a single father supporting his daughter's ambition to become an astronaut, a career often seen as unconventional for women. By encouraging her dreams, the father empowers his daughter, demonstrating that fathers can be instrumental in fostering their children's ambitions and self-confidence. His support helps his daughter develop a secure attachment and the independence needed to achieve her goals.

Father and Daughter illustrates the enduring bond between a father and his daughter from her childhood through adolescence to her professional success. The film challenges the stereotype that caregiving is exclusively a mother's role by showing the father's consistent presence and involvement in his daughter's life. His involvement at various stages demonstrates the long-term positive impact of a secure attachment with a father, influencing his daughter's emotional well-being and career achievements.

In the Pampers Love the Change campaign, fathers are shown changing diapers, soothing their babies, and bonding with them in everyday moments. This advertisement highlights the nurturing side of fatherhood, demonstrating that fathers are just as capable of providing care and emotional support to their children as mothers. "Fathers have a unique opportunity to demonstrate different forms of affection and play, contributing to a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development in ways that complement maternal caregiving" (Parke 107).

Similarly, the Dove Men+Care 'Calls for Dad' campaign features fathers as nurturing figures who are emotionally and practically present for their children. This series of advertisements depicts fathers comforting their

children, participating in daily routines, and being strong emotional presences in their lives.

Both campaign challenge traditional gender roles by depicting fathers as competent and nurturing caregivers, thus redefining societal expectations of fatherhood. These animated short films whether it's Hair Love, One Small Step, or Father and Daughter boldly challenge traditional gender roles by depicting fathers as capable and nurturing caregivers, on par with mothers.

Collectively, these short films compel viewers to reassess entrenched societal expectations regarding parental roles. By portraying fathers as nurturing and actively engaged in their children's lives, these narratives promote a more inclusive and diverse understanding of fatherhood. They inspire audiences to acknowledge and appreciate the diverse ways in which fathers contribute to their children's upbringing, emotional growth, and achievements. Ultimately, these stories advocate for a vision of parenting where roles are defined by love, care, and support rather than rigid gender stereotypes, fostering a more compassionate and equitable society for all families.

The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, during the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, formulated its policy around four central themes: early environment matter, biological and environmental influences, the importance of a comprehensive system and the role of policy and practice. Of these four major themes, they gave special emphasis on 'early environment matter and nurturing relationships as the development of children and their well-being are fostered by dependable relationships that offer love, nurturance, security, responsive interaction, and encouragement for exploration. Through statistical method and with the help of case studies, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth arrived at the conclusion that emotional disturbances are found in early attachment-related experiences; and that development is disrupted without at least one relationship and the consequences will be long-lasting.

Though various researchers carried out their study on secure attachment, they all foregrounded the relationship children and mothers as mothers are the primary source of caregivers. Though both maternal and paternal caregiving systems are there, the main argument is that caregiving provided by them may substantially differ as there is difference in parenting behavior. Even Bowlby carefully chose the term 'attachment figure', and cautioned in generalizing these findings to fathers. It is this skepticism regarding fathers as caregivers that has

prompted this research.

The central argument that fathers can be nurturing caregivers, just like mothers, is supported by the positive impact of secure attachment in father-daughter relationships and the portrayal of such dynamics in animated short films. *Hair Love*, *One Small Step*, and *Father and Daughter*, each demonstrate how fathers can nurture self-esteem, academic achievement, and motivation in their daughters.

By presenting fathers as consistent sources of support and love, both *Father and Daughter* and *Dear Sophie* emphasize the positive impact fathers have on their daughters' development. Besides the selected short films, the commercial campaigns Pampers' Love the Change and Dove Men+Care's Calls for Dad too portray fathers as competent and nurturing caregivers. The Pampers campaign features fathers actively engaging in caregiving tasks, emphasizing that these responsibilities are not solely maternal. By showcasing fathers in nurturing roles, the campaign promotes the idea that caregiving is a shared responsibility and that fathers are equally capable of providing the necessary care and emotional support for their children. This redefinition of fatherhood encourages society to see fathers as integral to their children's upbringing, capable of forming deep emotional connections and fostering secure attachments.

The aim of this study was to place paternal caregiving as equally important as maternal care. However, recent studies by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development childcare shows that high quality daycare is also compatible with secure attachment of young children. The scope of future research in this area is extensive as secure attachment is a cross-cultural phenomenon with contextual differences. Further, incorporating neuroscience into this study is crucial, as individual differences in attachment can be seen at the neural level through the examination of the neural circuits and the neurotransmitter systems, offering insights into the neurobiology of parenting.

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